

Review / Reseña

DiGiovanni, Lisa. *Unsettling Nostalgia in Spain and Chile: Longing for Resistance in Literature and Film*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020.

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Nostalgia, an emotional state that indicates a perceived discontinuity with the past and a discontentment with the present moment, is a common occurrence in human experience. However, it is often dismissed for being idealistic, unproductive, inaccurate, emotional, exclusionary, or manipulative. In her book *Unsettling Nostalgia in Spain and Chile: Longing for Resistance in Literature and Film*, Lisa DiGiovanni sets out to identify the critically redeeming qualities of nostalgia and to demonstrate its potential to generate productive confrontations with the past. To do this, DiGiovanni identifies an “unsettling nostalgia” in examples of Spanish and Chilean literature and documentary film, all of which are written and directed by women. *Unsettling Nostalgia* simultaneously idealizes and critiques the past by not shying away from uncomfortable and contradictory memories. While novels and documentaries that employ this kind of nostalgia wish to restore a connection with the political resistance and solidarity of the past, they also draw attention to the systemic problems and societal inequities that in many cases have lived on and continue to cause problems in the present. DiGiovanni asserts that acknowledging and facing up to these uncomfortable memories that form

part of nostalgic longing could open up the possibility of social and political mobilization in the present day.

DiGiovanni builds her understanding of unsettling nostalgia on Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of restorative and reflective nostalgias.¹ Restorative nostalgia, a "flat idealization" of the past (9), expresses a desire to return to so-called better days and to restore prior values, while refusing to acknowledge any contradictions or flaws of past paradigms. By contrast, reflective nostalgia allows for a more critical and nuanced perspective on the past and its complexities. With the term "unsettling nostalgia," DiGiovanni moves beyond Boym's framework by examining the frequent coexistence of multiple types of nostalgia and by showing how "contrasting types of longing can morph and mesh in unexpected ways" (15). Additionally, DiGiovanni reminds us throughout the book that restorative nostalgia can be employed by any ideological affiliation. Although the right wing is often fairly blamed for blindly harkening back to traditional values, the left also regularly presents a rosy portrait of past struggles without careful regard for the identities that are excluded from or repressed in a revolutionary utopic narrative.

Indeed, offering a more just representation of marginalized identities is where the unsettling nostalgic lens proves particularly useful. Apart from focusing on novels and documentary films created by women, the book adopts a feminist perspective that takes into account "the many ways in which gender, class, sexuality, and political affiliation work to constitute individual and collective experiences and nostalgic memories of them" (14). Although many of the texts analyzed present the movements of the Second Republic in Spain and the Popular Unity in Chile as "times of awakening, forward-moving momentum, and shared commitments to deeper forms of justice" (21), the unsettling nostalgic lens shows that these movements retained a considerable degree of masculinity in that they frequently failed to seriously undertake meaningful steps toward gender equality. Another advantage that feminist analysis gives the book is recovering emotion as a source of knowledge. Patriarchal norms often dictate that nostalgia be dismissed as unreliable for the emotional value it attaches to memory, when in fact emotion is a crucial aspect of the act of remembering.

Furthermore, the book's feminist perspective combines with a transatlantic approach. In recent decades, both Spain and Chile have seen the rise of an evolving nostalgia culture that is closely related to political struggles for social justice.

¹ *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

DiGiovanni contends that this book's inclusion of novels and films from both countries "expands our understanding of post-dictatorial memory, which is a topic often regarded from a monocultural or national standpoint," and draws out connections and insights that might otherwise go unnoticed (19). Although each country's dictatorship occurred at different moments in the twentieth century, both regimes cut short a moment of political awakening that continues to resonate through multiple generations into the present day. This book's scope and its position at the intersection of memory and identity make it relevant to several disciplines, including memory studies, women's and gender studies, transatlantic studies, Latin American studies, genocide studies, and film studies.

The introduction sets out the framework above—the different conceptualizations of nostalgia, including unsettling nostalgia, the historical background of Spain and Chile and the reasoning behind their comparison, and the book's feminist perspective on the portrayal of and work by women—but also identifies three central themes of the "new nostalgia current" that lend nostalgic works their critical potential, or, in DiGiovanni's words, "allow authors and filmmakers to join sharp historical inquiry with an inspired nostalgic vision" (43). First, works that incorporate nostalgia as a critical tool (like those analyzed in this book) seek a transgenerational connection in their engagement with the past—a connection that educates and empowers all generations to act in the present. Second, they often depict education (which played a key role in Spain's Second Republic and Chile's Popular Unity) as central to the formation of each movement and to the empowerment of those involved. Third, they are careful to portray and vindicate clandestine *resistance* in addition to the conditions of its repression—the representation of which was formerly omitted from cultural production. These themes aim to lay a foundation of empowerment, toward a "productive" encounter with the past, in that they draw connections with the present to help generate a vision of a more just future.

The novel at the center of the first chapter, Roberto Brodsky's *Últimos días de la historia* (2001), draws those connections by contrasting memories from before, during, and after Pinochet's dictatorship, and by highlighting parallels between the experiences of different generations. The central setting of Brodsky's novel is a nightclub where the protagonist, Lalo—an archaeology professor and father by day—dons a mask and gives an abstract performance every weekend that blends pivotal moments in Chilean recent history with personal recollections. The nightclub's clientele is comprised of two generations: those who came of age during the Popular Unity government and those

who were born in the first decade of Pinochet's dictatorship. Their shared sense of disenchantment over lost opportunities for structural change—under either the Popular Unity government or the reconciliatory, neoliberal Concertación transition to democracy—mingles in this space where an encounter between Lalo and an old friend stirs up forgotten memories. DiGiovanni demonstrates that Brodsky's "unsettling nostalgia" manifests itself through the coexistence of multiple types of nostalgia in the novel. For instance, nostalgia is employed by the characters and in Lalo's nightclub number to assign meaning to traumatic memories, as well as to escape them. And while restorative nostalgia is present in the novel, particularly in Lalo's memories of his precoup high school experiences, it is mitigated both by the complexity of the novel as a whole and by Brodsky's "performance" of Lalo's own restorative nostalgia, making readers aware of how it flattens and simplifies the reality of what was. These coexisting types of nostalgia flesh out a complex relationship with the past in a way that illuminates the transgenerational mourning for substantive social change and underlines the question of whether Chilean society can heal and move on when so many injustices have gone without redress.

The combination of restorative and reflective nostalgia also allows Carmen Castillo to compose a nuanced portrait of militancy and motherhood in her documentary *Calle Santa Fe* (2008). DiGiovanni begins the second chapter by highlighting the important distinction that while left-wing movements in Chile and Spain offered women comparatively expanded roles in politics and society, the movements themselves still incorporated conventional gender norms and expectations. This meant that women had to resist not only the misogyny of the right wing but also the less visible discrimination of the conventional social structure perpetuated by the left. This struggle becomes visible in Castillo's autobiographical documentary that reflects on her time in the radical leftist organization MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria), her relationship with MIR's leader, Miguel Enríquez, and her political exile in France. DiGiovanni notes that Castillo "cinematographically stages" subjective processes of memory in her documentary "by performing [her own] state of mind, which lingers between nostalgic memories of resistance and ambivalent views concerning women's political protagonism, motherhood, and return" and by "exploring, rather than obscuring, the emotional charge of one's political experience" (81). Crucially, this approach allows Castillo to place emphasis on the experience of motherhood without defaulting to a patriarchal model, instead demonstrating a new

perspective on the militancy and politics of the past that in turn suggests possible future collective goals.

DiGiovanni follows her discussion of Castillo's documentary with the analysis of another documentary that also presents a complex and nuanced depiction of politically active women, but with a considerably different technique. The third chapter focuses on *De monstruos y faldas* (2008), the twenty-four-minute film directed by Carolina Astudillo during her master's program in creative documentary at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Astudillo was born in Chile in 1975 and spent most of her childhood under Pinochet's regime. After studying journalism in Santiago in the 1990s, she moved to Catalonia in the 2000s to study non-fiction film. Her perspective, then, is one influenced by her personal experience with the post-dictatorship societies in both Chile and Spain, and the connections she draws between the two countries is evident in her work. *De monstruos y faldas* illustrates the experience of women who were incarcerated at Les Corts Women's Prison in postwar Barcelona. However, Astudillo's film distinguishes itself from films by her contemporaries (which are often characterized by the use of reflexive and performative modes of documentary, and with a strong emphasis on the filmmaker's own perspective, reflection, and self-questioning) by utilizing expository and poetic modes of documentary, by re-contextualizing found and archival footage, and by omitting any single voice of authority or all-encompassing mythical narrative. Instead, DiGiovanni argues that Astudillo wields experimental means such as those listed above—as well as inviting the viewer to interpret incomplete clues and reconstruct images—in order to create an unsettling nostalgia that disrupts traditional gender narratives and encourages viewers to question systems of violence, past and present.

In the fourth chapter, DiGiovanni turns her attention to *La voz dormida* (2002), Dulce Chacón's novel about communist women imprisoned in postwar Spain. Since its publication, *La voz dormida* has been heavily critiqued for its utopic, idealized, and depoliticized depiction of Republican women prisoners, and DiGiovanni agrees with many of these critiques. She reviews how the restorative nostalgia that the novel employs ultimately reinforces gender stereotypes instead of challenging them, smooths over the intense postwar political fragmentation of the left, and erases the complexity of the process of narrating traumatic memories. However, while DiGiovanni in no way understates the novel's shortcomings, neither does she ignore the contributions that this text does have to offer. She points out that, with this novel, Chacón wanted to resist the narrative of the second phase of Franco's dictatorship, when remaining

pockets of leftist opposition were criminalized and labeled “anti-Spanish” in government discourse. *La voz dormida* represented a group that had previously been widely neglected in cultural production, and the fact that the novel was one of the first to shed light on aspects of their experience—and to do so for a multi-generational audience—was far from insignificant. Finally, DiGiovanni’s attention to the multiple uses of nostalgia illuminates how it is used by the incarcerated characters as a tool for survival. The characters draw on nostalgia for resilience in the face of adversity—to preserve an emotional self and a coherent and stable sense of identity in trying times. For this nuanced treatment of the text that demonstrates the various ends toward which nostalgia can work, the chapter stands out as one of the most instructive of the book.

In contrast to *La voz dormida*, the fifth chapter deals with two novels that feature the postwar period in Spain without flattening out the complexities of the characters’ experiences—particularly those of leftist women. DiGiovanni examines two novels by Almudena Grandes: *El corazón helado* (2007) and *El lector de Julio Verne* (2012). Both texts engage with the concept of inner exile, which refers to the disconnection and loss experienced by those who were politically opposed to the dictatorship but remained in the country. In this chapter, DiGiovanni examines how unsettling nostalgia works in the context of inner exile, as it is represented by Almudena Grandes, to better illuminate the structural injustice perpetuated by the regime and to envision a future community that could integrate past and present legacies of resistance. The depiction of characters and family relations in *El corazón helado* demonstrates how the regime’s oppression went beyond political repression, due to the patriarchal, misogynistic system’s double standard that preyed on women. In addition, the novel’s narration puts on display the imperfect and incomplete process of recuperating memory. Meanwhile, *El lector de Julio Verne*—which adopts the perspective of a young boy in postwar Spain who is caught between the conflicting influences of his Francoist father and the local women who provide safe haven to resistance fighters—illustrates a process of conscientization that interrogates not only Franco’s regime, but traditional norms of masculinity and gender socialization. DiGiovanni argues that these highly nuanced, unsettling nostalgic depictions of a complicated past help to draw productive connections to the continuing struggles of the present day.

By the end of the book, the reader has developed an understanding of the wide variety of forms that nostalgia can take (which go far beyond the stereotypical, idealized, self-indulgent longing for the past), so they will not be surprised to find Roberto Bolaño’s 1996 novel, *Estrella distante*, to be the topic of the sixth and final chapter.

DiGiovanni opens the chapter by building on Boym's comparison of nostalgia and irony, two "forms of resistance that allow affection and reflection to be combined" (165). Irony and unsettling nostalgia both involve an understanding of the dissonance between surface meaning and alternative interpretations, and they resist both the idealization of the past and the present. DiGiovanni asserts that "when dramatic irony combines with wistful memory, unsettling nostalgia emerges" (165), and sets about demonstrating how irony joins forces in *Estrella distante* with Bolaño's wielding of metafiction, intertexts, conspiracy theories, parody, and photographs. Bolaño uses these devices to question and unsettle any comfortable understanding of memory, history, justice, and impunity, but he does so carefully, never conflating the sins of either side of the political spectrum, and always encouraging the reader to critically reassess their own conceptions.

In the same vein, throughout *Unsettling Nostalgia in Spain and Chile: Longing for Resistance in Literature and Film*, Lisa DiGiovanni is asking readers to critically reassess their understanding of nostalgia. The reader walks away able to recognize various types of nostalgia and the many purposes they can serve, and with an understanding that emotion is an inextricable part of memory and should not be neglected or discarded. Rather than a self-indulgent, rose-colored lens, a carefully employed unsettling nostalgia can represent untold stories from marginalized perspectives without fully subsuming them into any dominant discourse. Even beyond proposing the concept of unsettling nostalgia, DiGiovanni's approach is notable for its intersectionality, generosity, and nuance. Above all, *Unsettling Nostalgia in Chile and Spain* advocates for a *mindful* relationship with the past and its representations in the present, one that is committed to learning history's lessons not only by celebrating the past but also by making meaningful changes in the present.